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Silver is a Precious Metal for Two Whitworth Olympians

BY JANET HAUCK
WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY ARCHIVIST

History tells us that the Olympic Games began in ancient Greece in the year 776 B.C. But for Whitworth College of Spokane, the Games became personal in the summer of 1960, when future Whitworth graduate student and assistant football coach Bo Roberson captured an Olympic silver medal in the long jump. Sixteen years later, Whitworth's future women's head basketball coach Juliene Simpson made Olympic history by co-captaining the first U.S. women's Olympic basketball team. At those 1976 Summer Games, a silver medal was placed around her neck, as well.

Irvin "Bo" Roberson grew up in Philadelphia, and spent his high school years as a three-sport athlete. As a star on his high school basketball team, Bo regularly competed against cross-town rival Wilt Chamberlain. When he was recruited to Cornell, it was to play a sport during every season. By the time Roberson earned his B.A. in 1958, his college athletic career included a football kick-off return of 100 yards, an average of 17.6 rebounds per basketball game, and a broken school record in the long jump. He was also, as a future Olympic competitor put it, "one of the brainiest guys I ever met." A member of the Army

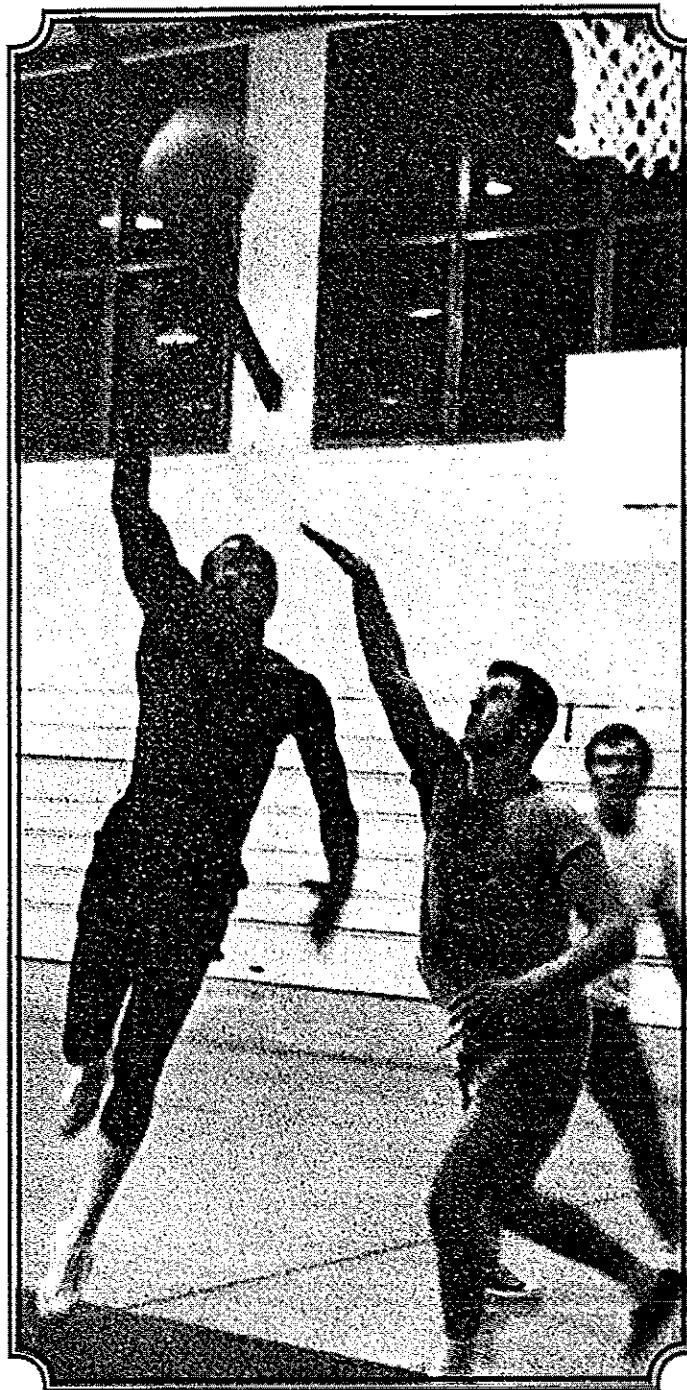
ROTC while at Cornell, Bo served as a lieutenant following graduation, while working as a coach for the track and field program at the U.S. Military Academy.

The multi-talented Roberson made his mark on the first day of the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. As thousands of athletes and officials from 83 delegations stood under the hot sun and waited for the Parade of Nations to begin, members of the American delegation began to panic. Most had no Olympic experience and knew nothing about marching in formation. At the last minute, Lieutenant Bo Roberson took on the role of drill sergeant, and put his teammates through some quick "hup-two-three-four" paces. The drilling must have worked, because one teammate remembered years later, "as [we] streamed through the tunnel, dark and cold, and out into the blazing sunlight, [we] were marching in unison!"

As an African-American member of the U. S. delegation, Roberson experienced a more serious moment later in the week. In the media coverage of the 1960s, journalists knew that any race-related statement would be sensitive in the context of both

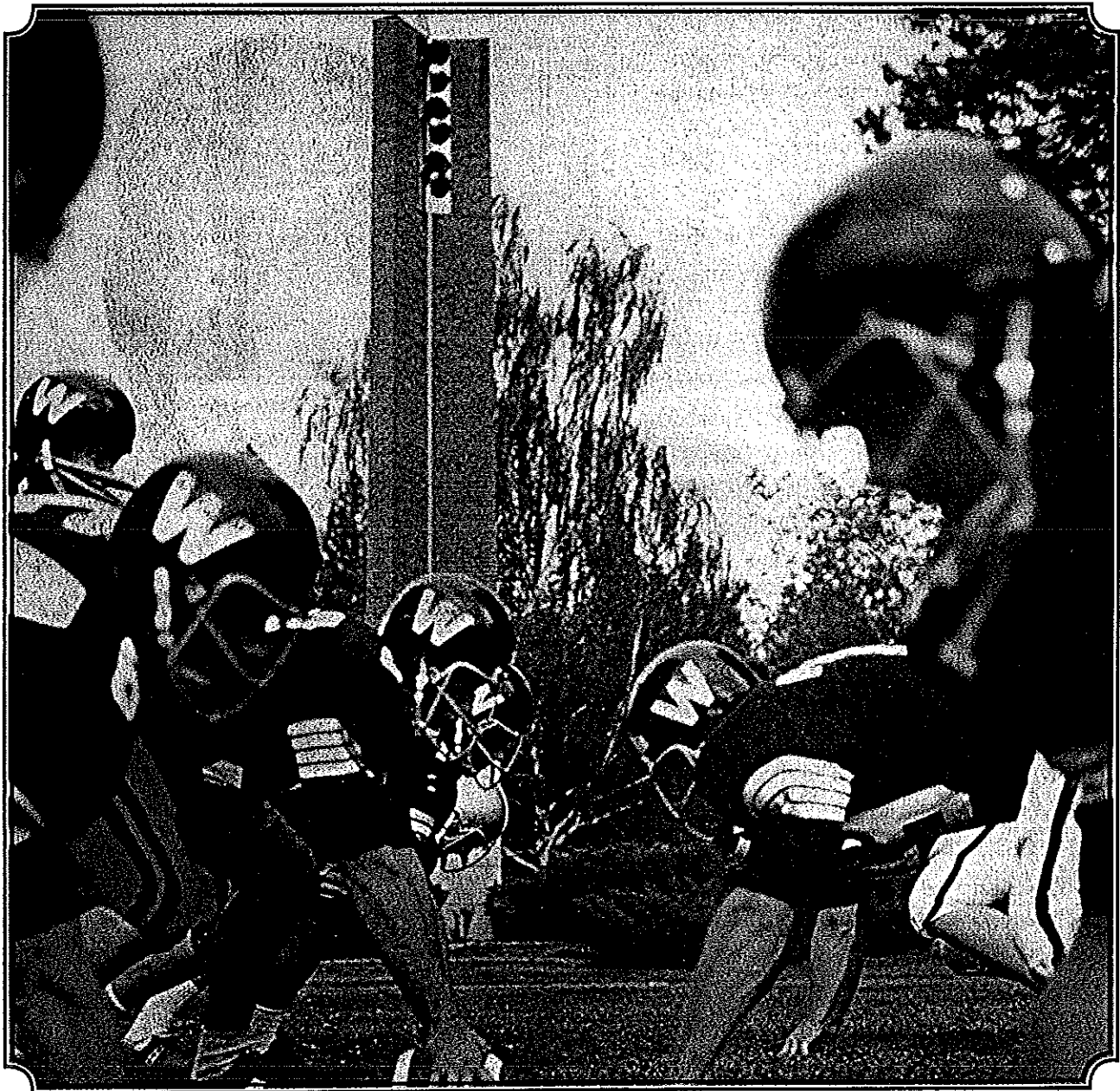
the Olympics and the Cold War. So it was surprising to hear a Soviet official tell the UPI wire service that "the Americans are superior in many events only because they have so many Negroes on the team... they have special physical endowments for sports." When the UPI reporter read this statement to a group of black Olympians, Bo Roberson answered, "Oh, sure, [high jumper] John Thomas over there has a third arm." Thomas himself countered, "It's nonsense to say there is any physiological difference between Negroes and whites." Another black athlete stated that track and field was a means to an end. "What is that end?" asked the reporter. It was Roberson who gave the final word; "The end is equality."

The late afternoon of September 2nd finally arrived, and the long jump finals were set to begin. There were one Russian and two Americans competing for gold, silver, and bronze. First the Russian jumped, a length of 26 feet, four-and-one-half inches. American Ralph Boston jumped next, landing 26 feet, seven-and-three-quarter inches from the starting point. Then it was Bo Roberson's turn. A British journalist described the moment: "The muscular Roberson stood at the beginning of the runway, looking at the cinder path he would have to travel. His dark face was impassive, but I wondered at that moment if he thought with sudden disquiet of the serious hamstring injury which caused his left leg to be bandaged. Suddenly he crouched and sprinted for the board that would relieve him of this unbearable tension. He hit it sweetly, rose high, and then landed in a shower of sand." The jump was measured at 26 feet, seven-and-three-eighths inches — three-eighths of an inch shy of Boston's! It would be a silver medal for



A true three-sport athlete, Bo Roberson takes time out of his busy coaching schedule to participate in the Whitworth faculty-student basketball game in 1970.

Photo courtesy of Whitworth University Archives.



The 1969 football team poses in the "Loop" on the Whitworth campus.

Photo courtesy of Whitworth University Archives.

Philadelphia's Bo Roberson, one of 21 received by members of the U. S. delegation.

Eventually, Roberson's many abilities would come in handy at Whitworth College. Pirate football fans reading their programs in the fall of 1969 learned that

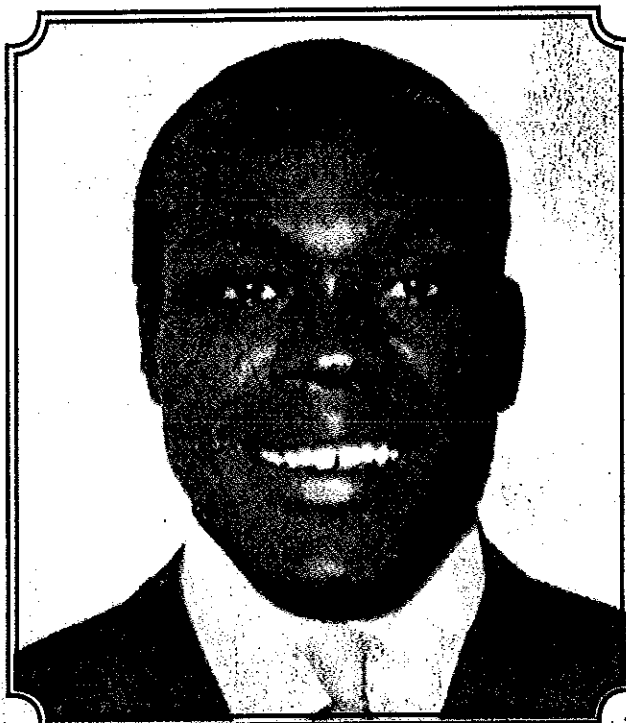
Bo Roberson was one of the team's new assistant coaches. "With the addition of Roberson to the coaching staff," the program stated, "Whitworth College brings one of the top athletes in the country to the campus. In 1960, Roberson placed second in

Olympic competition in the broad [long] jump, with a leap of 26 feet seven-and-three-eighths inches. After winning the silver medal, Roberson then turned his attention to professional football. He has played with the San Diego Chargers, the Oakland Raiders, the Buffalo Bills, and the Miami Dolphins. Roberson will also work as an assistant coach with the Pirate track team. He will be working on his Master's degree in physical education."

The Whitworthian student newspaper of September 6th proclaimed, "As the 1969 school year begins, so does the new football season. Not only is there new spirit, drive, and enthusiasm, but four new coaches will aid Coach Robbins this fall. Led by Bo Roberson [in the offensive department]... the Pirates are looking to a winning season." However, that dream was not to be fulfilled. The football team's record that year of 1-9 caused the 1970 yearbook to lament, "The hard-fighting Pirates found the 1969 season a rough one... in most ways it was a heart-breaking season."

Roberson was a coach at Whitworth for only one academic year, and a student for two, earning his M.A. in 1971. Although his time at Whitworth was brief, professor of art, Spike Grosvenor, remembers Bo as "very personable." This same sentiment was echoed by the long jumper who bested him at the Olympics, Ralph Boston. Boston claimed, "He was a super all-around person, athlete or otherwise. I'll never forget him." Bo Roberson moved on to other coaching opportunities after leaving Whitworth, and at the age of 58 completed his doctorate. Yet, he is still remembered as someone who brought a glimpse of the world stage to a home-town college in Spokane.

Just about the time Bo Roberson was beginning his doctoral studies, another Olympic silver medalist was getting ready to join the Whitworth coaching staff. In the summer of 1988, alumni reading their copies of Whitworth Today spotted this headline:



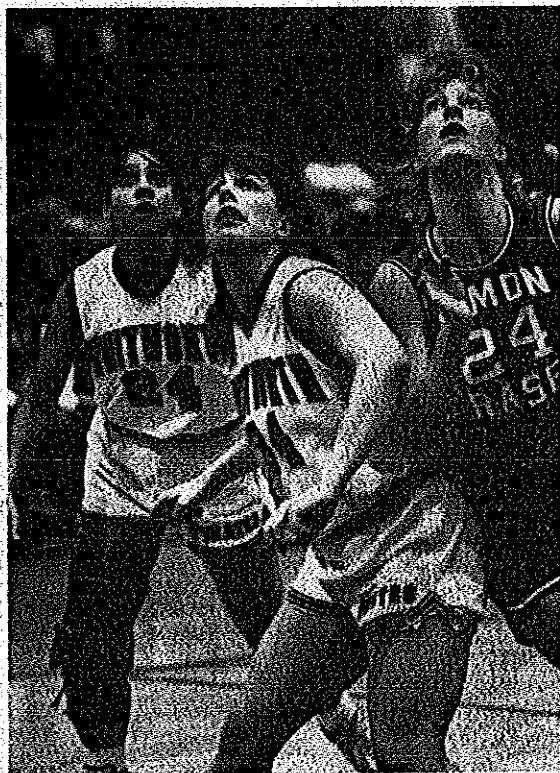
Assistant Coach Bo Roberson's friendly face appears in the program from a 1969 Whitworth football game.

Photo courtesy of Whitworth University Archives.

FORMER OLYMPIAN TO COACH WOMEN'S BASKETBALL. "Silver is a precious metal," the article began, "especially when it's earned at the Olympic Games. That's an experience Juliene B. Simpson had as co-captain of the USA women's basketball team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, and it's just part of the record of achievement she brings to Whitworth as the college's new women's basketball coach."

This new women's basketball coach would spend three successful seasons at Whitworth, but she would always claim that the highlight of her basketball career came in 1976 when she was a member of that silver medal team. The Montreal Summer Games were the first to include women's basketball as a medal sport, and Juliene Simpson, as team co-captain and starting point guard, was there to make history. Growing up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Simpson quickly rose to

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL



**Athletics at
Whitworth College**

basketball stardom during her time at Nebraska's John F. Kennedy College in the mid-1970s. She earned AAU All-America honors each of her four years, while helping her team win a pair of AAU national basketball championships. Simpson also played in the 1975 World Championships, with her U. S. team finishing in eighth place. "We weren't even expected to qualify for the Olympics," she said. When it came time to try out for the U.S. Olympic team, Juliene was one of 1,500, from whom 12 would be selected. "There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to make the team," she remembered. "I had really good ball-handling skills and I had a New Jersey attitude and believed I could do anything."

For the team's pre-Olympic practice sessions, one of Simpson's coaches recalled being sent to Warrensburg, Missouri, a small town of just over 13,000. After holding intra-squad practice for several days, they soon began to seek other teams against which to compete. There were no local women's teams, so they convinced the coach of the local high school boys' basketball team to hold a practice game. The story goes that the boys were wary of playing against females, but by half-time, they didn't want to come out of the locker room for the second half!

The team finally arrived in Montreal, where one of Juliene's teammates remembered that they had at least a week of practice before the Games were to begin. Their first draw was a 9:00 a.m. game against powerhouse, Japan. So in order to prepare the players to get up early on game day, the coaches started having them get up every morning at 4:30, eat breakfast, and attend early morning practice. As one might imagine, this routine did not go over well with the team. In order to make the best of it, and maybe also to make a point, the players showed up to practice in their pajamas! The coaches had them practice in PJs for at least half an hour before sending them back to their rooms to change.



Pictured left: This 1989 promotional flyer encourages women to come play basketball at Whitworth. Pictured above: Coach Juliene Simpson smiles from the inside of a 1989 flyer promoting women's basketball at Whitworth. *Photo courtesy of Whitworth University Archives.*

On game day, July 19th, it was Juliene Simpson who gained the distinction of making the first assist and committing the first foul in Olympic women's basketball history. "We were playing Japan in the first game and a girl got by me on the first play and I fouled her," she recounted. "They took the ball out of bounds and missed a shot and we got possession. I

brought the ball up court and passed to Lucia Harris, who scored the first basket." Although the team eventually lost its first game to Japan, victories over Bulgaria and Canada soon followed. A definitive loss to the Soviet Union came next, with a final 83-67 win over Czechoslovakia that sealed the silver medal spot for the U. S. women. On the podium, the undefeated

Soviet Union team wore the gold, while the Bulgarian women took the bronze.

"No one had expected us to do anything," Simpson recalled. "The other teams were basically professionals who practiced all year round. We were coaches and college and high school players. But," she emphasized, "We all believed we would go home with a medal." A prominent player in all five games, the 5-foot-6-inch Simpson averaged a total of 8 points, 3.6 rebounds, and 4.4 assists. She also went 16 of 16 from the free throw line, a perfect record which was never matched in the eight succeeding Summer Games. After her Olympic success, Juliene retired as a player and resumed her coaching career. As she noted, "There really weren't any professional basketball opportunities for women back then."

Twelve years passed, and then in 1988, the November 8th Whitworthian reported that Whitworth had hired Juliene Simpson to come and coach the remnants of an "ill-fated squad" from the previous year. That team had forfeited the second half of its season after five key players were suspended for rules violations. Fortunately, the 1988-89 Lady Pirates began their pre-season with a triumphant win over the alumni team, scoring 88 to the alumni's 49. By mid-season Coach Simpson was quoted as saying, "I am very proud of how we've been performing. Each player has taken responsibility for her efforts, enthusiasm, and motivation in preparing for each game."

The following 1989-90 year found the Lady Pirates continuing to look up. At mid-season the student newspaper exclaimed, "Few could have forecast the remarkable rise of the Whitworth women's basketball team from mediocrity in years past to dominance this year!" By the end of that season, a headline in the March 13, 1990 Whitworthian proclaimed: WOMEN BREAK RECORD FOR WINS; JULIENE SIMPSON IS AWARDED N.C.I.C. COACH OF THE YEAR

HONORS. The women had accrued a record of 21-7, enabling them to advance through two rounds of post-season championship play. In the same article, senior Darsi Frazier made the telling comment, "Last year we played not to lose. We knew we could win this year."

By the time the Whitworthian rolled off the press on May 7, 1991, Coach Simpson had finished her third year and made plans to move on. The sports editor reported, "After reviving Whitworth's women's basketball program in just three seasons, Juliene Simpson, head coach and assistant athletic director, has accepted the head women's basketball coaching job at NCAA Division I Bucknell University." He quoted Coach Simpson's parting words; "We'll always cherish our memories at Whitworth. We'll remember the closeness and caring of the students and professors especially." One of Simpson's former Pirate players, Melinda Larson, still has fond memories of her coach's time at Whitworth. "Juliene was the best coach I had in all of my basketball playing experience," Larson remembers. "I think it had a lot to do with her vast experience as a player, but there was certainly also her personality and knowledge, along with competitiveness. Juliene really understood the perspective of a collegiate player and coached in a way that brought out our strengths."

Looking back to Montreal, Simpson reminisced, "I'll never forget the experience... I wore the medal for eight straight days and never took it off. I even slept with it." As an honor befitting the U. S. women history-makers, Juliene and her Olympic teammates were inducted into the National Girls and Women in Sport Hall of Fame in 1996. In 2000, Simpson herself was inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. Like Bo Roberson before her, Juliene Simpson had become a winner, not only in the Olympics, but at Whitworth College as well. ☞



The 1988-1989 Whitworth women's basketball players dress up for their team photo, with Coach Simpson on the upper far right. *Photo courtesy of Whitworth University Archives.*

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